How to do the history of the self

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Abstract

The history of the self is a flourishing field. Nevertheless, there are some problems that have proven difficult to overcome, mainly concerning teleology, the universality or particularity of the self and the gap between ideas and experiences of the self. In this article, I make two methodological suggestions to address these issues. First, I propose a 'queering' of the self, inspired by recent developments in the history of sexuality. By destabilizing the modern self and writing the histories of its different and paradoxical aspects, we can better attend to continuities and discontinuities in the history of the self and break up the idea of a linear and unitary history. I discern four overlapping and intersecting axes along which discourses of the self present themselves: (1) interiority and outer orientation, (2) stability and flexibility, (3) holism and fragmentation, and (4) self-control and dispossession. Second, I propose studying four 'practices of self' through which the self is created, namely (1) techniques of self, (2) self-talk, (3) interpreting the self, and (4) regulating practices. Analysing these practices allows one to go beyond debates about experience versus expression, and to recognize that expressions of self are never just expressions, but make up the self itself.

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The history of the self is a flourishing field. It has recently been observed that 'the flood of publications' on the subject of the self, 'cannot be surveyed anymore' (Keller, 2008: 19; cited in Sabean and Stefanovska, 2012: 13n3). Several scholars have noted the importance of the history of the self: not only is the self a product of historical developments, it is also a cause of historical change. The self has a history and this history can and needs to be studied (Hunt, 2014: 1585; Owens and Samblanet, 2013: 230). This is, however, a most hazardous enterprise, as the many publications on the self bring along very different definitions, methods and research traditions. There is absolutely no agreement on what the historiography of the self exactly examines, there is even no consensus about what the self is. As Lynn Hunt (2014: 1579) has recently stated, 'given the uncertainties about selfhood (what it is and how it is produced), it might seem that any history of the self is next to impossible'.[1] How then, can we do the history of the self?

In this article, I propose a programme for the study of the history of the self. Due to the lack of conceptual clarity, many scholars are talking past each other. There is little real interaction of ideas and there is often confusion about what, exactly, is being said. I will therefore make some suggestions for defining the self as a research object, and for ways of studying its history. Although the history of the self is a very popular domain, I will show that there are some remaining theoretical and conceptual problems, mainly concerning teleology, the universality or particularity of the self and the gap between ideas and experiences of the self.

To address the problem of teleology and the universality or particularity of the self, I will borrow from the history of sexuality and 'queer' the history of the self. Modern conceptions of self are not uniform. We should destabilize the modern self and write the histories of its different and paradoxical aspects. To this end, I discern four axes along which the history of the self can be written: (1) interiority and outer orientation, (2) stability and flexibility, (3) holism and fragmentation, and (4) self-control and dispossession. These four axes overlap, intersect and interact; they are not separate histories. Distinguishing them makes it possible to break up the idea of a linear and unitary history of the self and to better understand continuities and changes in the past.

[1] Hunt herself has proposed a solution to this problem, referring to neuroscience as a source of inspiration to conduct the history of the self. Although my approach here is different, our arguments touch on several common points, particularly concerning the embodiment of the self and the usefulness of the history of emotions to the history of the self.

The second innovation that I propose is inspired by recent debates in emotions history. To be able to bridge the perceived gap between ideas and experiences of self, I suggest using the concept of 'practices of self'. Practices of the self are the things people do to shape, form and transform the self. A particular sense of self does not exist prior to these practices, but is created in them. Particular practices of self are: (1) techniques of the self, employed with the goal of transforming one's own self; (2) self-talk, speaking about the self; (3) interpreting the self, looking for causes for and explanations of an individual's actions, and (4) regulating practices that convey social norms concerning the self.

I do not wish to overstate my originality: this article builds on earlier theoretical reflections by other scholars, both in the history of the self and in its neighbouring domains of study. My main intent is to bring together scattered arguments and methods. The focus of the examples in this article will be on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are my area of expertise and one of the most popular time periods for studies in the history of the self. My intention here is more methodological rather than epistemological and purely theoretical. Although the methods that I propose imply certain theoretical and ontological positions, I will not extensively argue these positions. I will, however, refer to the relevant publications that do provide such argumentations.

What is this self, actually?

One fundamental problem needs to be addressed first: what is the self? Scholars have not agreed upon a single definition, and to make things even more complicated, use the concept in quite different ways. The word 'self' has been used to signify: (1) the individual or person (e.g. Coleman, 2014); (2) the cultural conception of the individual (e.g. Geertz, 1974; Mauss, 1938; Taylor, 1989); (3) the cultural conception of a part of the individual (e.g. Goldstein, 2005); (4) the cultural conception of a psychic entity in the individual (e.g. Lyons, 1978; Wahrman, 2004); (5) personality; (6) self-consciousness; (7) self-presentation; and (8) identity (adapted from Spiro, 1993: 114). As a consequence, for instance, recent studies of the 'scholarly self', which are about social norms and self-presentation of scholars (Paul, 2012), have little in common with Dror Wahrman's (2004: xi) 'modern self', the 'essential core' that founds human identities. The conceptual confusion has allowed one prominent historian to claim even very recently that cultural historians have investigated the self 'only secondarily, if at all' (Hunt, 2014: 1578).

It may not be possible or indeed not even desirable to definitively define the self. Still, I believe that we need to somehow specify what we are talking about when we talk about the self, so that we avoid talking past each other. Any sort of 'working definition' of the self risks, however, creating the illusion of the self as something stable, something with a singular history. In establishing this working definition, I certainly do not attempt to capture the 'essence' of the self, but merely to point to where a study of the self could start – without stipulating where it should end.

Jan Goldstein (2005: 2) has considered the self as 'individuated mental stuff'. This seems like a good starting point, because it covers the terrain most historians (though perhaps not most philosophers and anthropologists) study when they study the self. According to this view, the self is, firstly, 'mental' or 'psychic' in the broadest sense of these words. When we study the self, we study the way people think and feel. This does not need to preclude conceptions of the self that do not recognize a division between mind and body: the point of defining the history of the self as concerned with mental stuff is to differentiate it from, for instance, approaches to the history of the body that do not take into account the ways people think and feel.

Secondly, the self is 'individuated', distinguished from other people. The self marks the boundaries between people. This distinguishes the history of the self from certain approaches to the history of collective identities that do not take the individual experience into account. Again, this does not need to preclude conceptions of the self that are socially oriented or that do not or only minimally recognize a difference between an individual and his or her social groups.

This working definition of the self as 'individuated mental stuff' is vested in two oppositions (self vs body, self vs other) that are not universally recognized. This is why I reiterate that it is only a starting point for the history of the self, based on what is perhaps today commonly taken as characteristic of the self in Western Europe and Northern America. This starting point may lead to very different conceptions at other times and in other places. Mind and body may be conceptualized differently and viewed as more or less divided, and the individual may likewise be considered as more or less autonomous from others. This allows one to study very different conceptions of self, such as a romantic conception of the self as an 'inner core', a religious understanding of self as 'soul', an idealistic understanding as 'spirit', a psychoanalytical understanding as 'ego', or a psychological understanding as 'personality': all of these are overlapping but slightly different interpretations of the self.

Queering the history of the self

Even among those scholars who share a somewhat similar conception of what they are researching, there is a debate whether the self is a ‘peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures’, or rather ‘a universal, like culture’ (Geertz, 1974: 31; Sökefeld, 1999: 429). The debate was especially fierce among anthropologists in the 1990s, reacting against Clifford Geertz’s work. Following Marcel Mauss, Geertz (1974: 31) claimed that the person, which he equates with the self, is conceived in the Western world as ‘a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background’. This was, he argued, different in most other cultures.

Several anthropologists took issue with this view. Two critiques are interesting for my purposes here: Melford Spiro (1993) has argued that all cultures make some distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’, as is demonstrated by the presence of a pronoun signifying ‘I’ in every known language. Even in cultures where the existence of an inner self was explicitly denied, in practice, he argued, people did use such a self-concept: the autonomous, egocentric and independent self was quite common outside the West. Another strand of critique focused on the unitary view on the Western self: several anthropologists have argued that there are many different conceptions of self in the West as well, and that Geertz’s view on the Western self was mostly derived from written philosophical traditions, not from analyses of experiences (Holland and Kipnis, 1994; Murray, 1993; Sökefeld, 1999).

These arguments are reminiscent of a debate which has preoccupied historians of homosexuality for a long time. Inspired by Mary McIntosh’s (1968) article on ‘the homosexual role’, many historians and sociologists started to argue that the Western conception of homosexuality was not universal, but historically constructed. They have been labelled ‘constructionists’ and opposed to ‘essentialists’, who argued that a ‘homosexual essence’ of some kind has always existed (Stein, 1992). ‘Essentialists’ heaped up anecdotal ‘evidence’ of homosexuality in past times (Boswell, 1980; Norton, 1997), while ‘constructionists’ argued that it was only in the late nineteenth century (or, for some, the eighteenth century, or earlier, or later) that the homosexual, as a distinct being desiring sex and love with people of his or her own sex, came into existence (Greenberg, 1988; Halperin, 1990; Trumbach, 1989).

The debates soon degenerated into a deaf man's talk and new scholars sought a way out of them. With her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laid the foundation of what became known as 'queer theory'. She argued against a Foucauldian epistemological rupture, a 'Great Paradigm Shift' with the 'birth of the homosexual', for it obscured the incoherence and instability of 'homosexuality as we conceive of it today'. The concept of 'homosexuality', she wrote, is defined and used in overlapping, contradictory and conflicting ways. Earlier ways of conceiving sexuality continue to interfere with new ideas. Some queer theorists – mostly scholars active in literary and cultural studies – following in her wake have then decided that is was time to leave the study of historical developments for what they were altogether, as it was considered to be necessarily 'teleological' and 'heteronormative' (cf. Traub, 2013).

Most historians, of course, would not go so far. Queer theory's criticisms, however, inspired them to reflect on the matters of continuity and change, coherence and incoherence and stability and instability. David Halperin (2000, 2002) has most fruitfully adapted his earlier ideas on the construction of homosexuality to accommodate Sedgwick's criticisms. In *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, he claimed that every history of homosexuality should start from modern notions of homosexuality, in all their incoherence. Historians should then disintegrate this concept, trace the genetic origins of its different aspects and locate their convergences. Modern homosexuality should be distinguished from these earlier discourses, but continuities should also be acknowledged. Such a project, he claimed, 'would be able to capture the play of identities and differences within the synchronic multiplicity of different but simultaneous traditions of discourse that have existed through the ages as well as the play of identities and differences across the various diachronic transitions within each of them over the course of time' (Halperin, 2002: 108). He then distinguished four categories of understandings of male sex and gender deviance, and sketched their history and their relation to the modern category of homosexuality.

In light of these debates and parallel tendencies towards destabilization in other fields, it seems useful to adopt a similar approach to the history of the self. By 'queering' the history of the self, by starting from modern notions of self, destabilizing them and tracing the histories of their different and contradicting aspects, we can move beyond the impasse between universalists and peculiarists. Some aspects of the modern self recur across different cultures and periods, while others are rather less common. It is most important to recognize, in these histories, differences along lines of gender, class and race, while at same time questioning the viability of these very categories, destabilising and deconstructing them by

analysing inherent mechanisms of power distribution. Queering the history of the self makes it possible to deal with accusations of teleology by readily acknowledging a start from present conceptions of self, but investigating their valence throughout history. 'Queering' is, moreover, associated with 'reading against the grain', destabilizing and disrupting established notions of historical developments and rendering things undecipherable (Houlbrook, 2013). Incomprehensibility should not be the end, but it may be a means to advance research into new directions.

For the remainder of this section, I discern four axes along which the self is and has been conceived. They are linked and overlap in important ways, but all have their own specificities. The 'modern self', interior, stable, whole and in control of itself, is one specific constellation of these axes. Although the discourses on the axes I discern seem mutually exclusive, this is not necessarily the case, as the self and its conceptions are always unstable and full of paradoxes. The axes that I discern here are of course by no means a definitive or exhaustive enumeration of all the variables that make up 'our current conception of self'. I merely intend to tentatively distinguish some crucial aspects of what makes up this current conception of self, in order to be able to write their histories, and in order to see similarities and differences, discrepancies and paradoxes within and between these different variables.

As I indicated in the introduction, the four axes that I discern are (1) interiority and outer orientation, (2) stability and flexibility, (3) holism and fragmentation, and (4) self-control and dispossession. While the first of each of these variables has traditionally been considered to be constituent of the 'modern' conception of self, the others continue to disturb this self.

Interiority, a sense of inner depths, is perhaps one of the most crucial elements in the historiography of the modern self. Charles Taylor (1989) has discussed the history of the self as a process of a growing sense of inwardness. Dror Wahrman (2004: 179–89) has similarly insisted that a sense of inner depths was an essential aspect of the 'modern self' that developed around 1780. Prior to this time, he argued, people lacked the notion of something like an inner core. They were socially turned, outward-oriented rather than oriented towards themselves. The example of sensibility, with its stress on empathy, neatly demonstrates this: people's emotions were oriented towards others, not towards themselves. Carolyn Steedman (1995) has, from a somewhat different perspective, also argued that a sense of interiority increased between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century. Particularly through the idea of childhood, people provided themselves with an interiorized self that was the result of a personal history, an idea that culminated in Freud's thought.

Discourses of outer orientation can be found in two kinds: there are those discourses that imply that the self is mainly socially orientated, such as the ones that Wahrman has analysed in the earlier eighteenth century, and there are those discourses that consider the body to be the most important element of the self. Despite a growing sense of depths, outer orientation has remained important, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The idea of 'embarrassment', for instance, which had a determining role in twentieth-century American life, refers far more to social orientation than to inner depths (Holland and Kipnis, 1994). Similarly, phrenology (Goldstein, 1999: 48–9) and criminal anthropology (Horn, 2003) continued to focus on the body as an indication of the self in the nineteenth century. At the same time, discourses of interiority were also present before the end of the eighteenth century. In early Christianity, for instance, there was a great interest in techniques of self-examination, in discovering what was hidden 'inside' – Saint Augustin's *Confessions* may serve as a prime example (Foucault, 1993). Narratives of interiority and bodily or social orientation both continue to appear throughout history.

A discourse that is sometimes connected to interiority is the discourse of authenticity. The sense of an inner self may be combined with a sense that this inner self is a 'true self' and that one needs to live accordingly. Linked to Enlightenment cultural criticism, 'authenticity', or this interpretation of authenticity, seems to have been a more innovative idea of the late eighteenth century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau has often been identified as one of the originators of this new cult of fidelity to one's true self, this celebration of one's individuality (Carnevali, 2014). It is important to note that interiority does not always suppose authenticity. It seems that, before the late eighteenth century, and in many social circles also afterwards, there was a social obligation to conceal aspects of the inner self. In her study of eighteenth-century manner books, Eveline Koolhaas-Grosfeld (2011) has shown, for example, that introspection was seen a necessary means to control one's self and to be able to follow rules of civility. Awareness of a 'true self' did not therefore necessitate attaching great significance to it. It is, moreover, important to acknowledge that, even though discourses of 'being yourself' or 'having your own style' abound in late-twentieth century society, the idea that the inner self should be controlled and concealed has never disappeared. Perhaps even more extremely, calls for self-renunciation also continually occur, even, as Charly Coleman (2014) has shown, even at the height of 'authenticity' discourse of the late eighteenth century.

The second axis that I would like to discuss concerns stability and flexibility. Dror Wahrman has, again, most lucidly stated that the modern self is a stable self. He has observed

that in the short eighteenth century, ‘identity play’, crossing borders of gender, race and class, was possible and to a certain extent acceptable, for instance in masquerades. Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt (1984) has argued that people in the Renaissance quite self-consciously ‘fashioned’ their selves. Identities were malleable and flexible. This all changed with the advent of a stable self at the end of the eighteenth century, Wahrman has argued. The borders of identity categories, or at least some of them, were no longer to be crossed: the popularity of masquerades diminished; children were no longer considered to be *tabulae rasae*, but to have been born with particular characteristics which they could not overcome. They had a stable self.

Now the nineteenth century of course also had its share of crooks, con-artists and transvestites, crossing boundaries and playing with different identities. Moreover, as Warhman (2004: 278–81) himself has noted, some identity categories, such as nation and religion, became more loose and changeable from the late eighteenth century on. So again, we see conflicting discourses. A sense of a stable self has always been disrupted by discourses of flexibility and malleability.

Connected to the question of the stability and flexibility of the self, is the axis of autonomous self-control (as in: being in control of yourself) and dispossession. The autonomous individual has had many historiographical births – in antiquity, in early Christianity, in the twelfth century, in the renaissance, and in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unlike people from a usually only loosely defined ‘earlier era’, the ‘modern individual’ was able to make his (or her, but more often his) own decisions, independent of a larger collective (cf. Porter, 1997). It seems, however, that some degree of autonomy, some degree of agency and an ability to make self-conscious decisions, was present in every time. The degree to which this what Jerrold Seigel (2005) has called ‘reflexive basis of selfhood’ was acknowledged, has however strongly varied, as Seigel himself and other intellectual historians have shown.

More tangible, perhaps, than discourses of self-control are discourses of dispossession, discourses of not being in control. Again, intellectual historians have made essential analyses of discourses of social and biological determination, or, as Charly Coleman (2014) has recently done, of the ways in which people surrendered themselves to God. Far less research has been devoted to the use of discourses of lack of self-control in practice. Particularly interesting are discourses of what Dana Rabin (2004) has called ‘displacement of self’: individuals who are considered to normally be in control of themselves, use these discourses to evade responsibility for their actions at certain times. By referring to

drunkenness, possession or madness, individuals could claim 'not to be themselves' while they did or did not do something, effectively denying control over themselves at these times. Rabin argued that the use of these discourses in criminal court greatly expanded over the course of the eighteenth century. At the same time, it was implied that the individual, when not 'displaced', was in control of his or her own actions.

Finally, discourses of holism and fragmentation can be distinguished. The most authoritative work in this respect has been Jan Goldstein's (2005) *The Post-Revolutionary Self*. The dominant psychological theory in eighteenth-century France was 'sensationalism'. In sensationalist thought, there was little concern for the idea of a unitary consciousness, which led to a conception of the mind as consisting of different mental faculties, operating somewhat independently, but nevertheless all knowable. At the end of the eighteenth century, and primarily in the nineteenth century, sensationalism was heavily criticized and replaced as the dominant psychology by 'cousinianism', named after its initiator Victor Cousin. Cousin and his followers constructed a psychology around a holist and *a priori* self. The idea of a fragmented self became less popular until the advent of Freud and the theory of the 'unconscious', which proposed again that the self was fragmented, but this time, it was not able to know all aspects of itself. However, as Goldstein acknowledged, alternatives to Cousinian holist psychology, such as phrenology, which offered a fragmented conception of the self, were also referred to in the nineteenth century. Even then, discourses of a holist self were therefore not the only discourses available.

These four variables overlap, intersect and interact on many important points. It is therefore crucial to note that these are not separate histories. Distinguishing them has however, I think, many methodological advantages and makes it possible to be better aware of what, exactly, we are talking about when we are talking about the self. It makes it possible, furthermore, to break up the idea of a single, unitary history of the self, and to consider convergences and divergences of different aspects of the self, through time and among different social groups. A proper history of the self needs to acknowledge these different aspects and integrate them into any larger narrative.

Practices of self

'Scholars have written at great length about the emergence of individualism and autonomy as doctrines,' wrote Lynn Hunt (2007: 33) in *The Invention of Human Rights*, 'but much less about how the self itself might change over time.' She raises an important point: to what

extent does thought about the self relate to the self, as it is experienced and practiced? Can we know the self apart from its representations? Does the self even have a history if it is not a history of its representations? Some scholars arguing for the universality of the self have posited that it is indeed only the representation of the self that changes (Sökefeld, 1999). Many others seem to implicitly assume that only ideas about and representations of the self are, in fact, knowable, and that history as a consequence should only study these.

Historians working in other domains have, of course, encountered very similar problems. Nowhere have they been addressed more explicitly – at least in recent times – than in the historiography of emotions. The history of emotions intersects at crucial points with the history of the self (cf. Reddy, 2009): emotions have, for instance, been considered to 'well up' inside a person (interiority), or to make a person do things, 'in rage', he or she would otherwise not do (displacement). It is a domain that has known huge development over the last thirty years. While emotions had already been discussed by early pioneers as Johan Huizinga and Lucien Febvre, it was primarily from the 1980s on that emotions history gained a firm theoretical grounding.

In 1985, Peter and Carol Stearns wrote a programmatic article for the history of emotions, in which they launched the term 'emotionology'. With this neologism, they referred to 'the collective emotional standards of a society', which they tried to recover primarily from advice literature (Stearns and Stearns, 1985: 813). In this way, they distinguished emotionology, emotional standards and expressions, from emotions themselves, which were far more difficult to study. Studying emotionology had, however, as the Stearns's readily admitted, a distinct disadvantage: they did not capture actual experiences. What they did not recognize, but what critics did, was that by coining the term 'emotionology', they widened the gap between experience and expression, as if these two were totally unrelated (Hoegaerts and Van Osselaer, 2013: 454).

William Reddy (2001) therefore proposed another approach, with another neologism: 'emotives'. With his theory of emotives, he tried to find a balance between social constructionist and biological determinist approaches to emotions. Borrowing from speech act theory, he argued that emotives, verbal emotional expressions, were essential in shaping and managing emotions. Saying 'I am sad' was not just a statement of fact, but had self-altering effects and changed the feeling itself. Reddy therefore emphasized the vocabulary of emotion to study the history of emotions.

In a recent article, Monique Scheer (2012) found that the debate on whether historians had access to real experiences of emotions had not yet been resolved adequately. She

proposed an approach grounded in Bourdieu's practice theory. Emotions are not something people *have*, she maintained, but something people *do*. By claiming that a person does not feel prior to the 'doing' of an emotion, the gap between experience and expression of emotions disappears. Scheer consequently discerned four categories of emotional practices: mobilizing (practices inducing an emotional state, e.g. penance), naming (like Reddy's emotives), communicating (emotional expressions, like crying) and regulating practices (emotional norms).

At several points, Scheer's argument touched on the history of the self. Subjects, she posited, are nothing but the sequence of acts in which they participate. These acts encompass giving attention to 'inner' processes. People have to learn to cultivate an 'inner self', to be 'true to themselves' (Scheer, 2012: 200). The self is not given and not only learned through theoretical instruction: interiority, autonomy, stability, wholeness and their counterparts are things that need to be done. Scheer's theory therefore also seems to be a fruitful starting point to develop a theory of self that can encompass, or go beyond, experience and expression. Looking for the practices by which the self was formed may help us to take the history of the self to a new level.

Let me first try to define, or delimit, what practices of self are. Practices of self are the things people do to shape, form and transform the self, the mental side of the individual. The self and a particular sense of self do not exist prior to these practices, but are created in them. People have to practice, have to *do* interiority or outer orientation, stability or flexibility, autonomy or dispossession, wholeness or fragmentation. We can find these practices of self in historical sources through other 'doings and sayings' on which these practices are dependent and intertwined. Adapting from Scheer's categories of emotional practices, I discern four overlapping categories of practices of self.[2]

(1) A first category concerns what Michel Foucault has called 'techniques of self', a concept he heavily relied on in his works and lectures of the 1980s. According to Foucault, technologies (or, as he says elsewhere, techniques) of self 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Martin *et al.*, 1988:

[2] Scheer devotes much attention to the theoretical framework of practice theory, habitus and embodiment. These are vital notions to understand how practices work, but as they do not differ much for emotional practices or practices of self, I will not comment on her insights here.

18). Technologies of self allow people to form and transform their self. They are the things people do to change or stay the same, to gain control or to lose it, to discover their 'true self', to please others, to live more authentically or to renounce themselves.[3]

As will strike many of those familiar with Foucault's earlier work, mechanisms of power are curiously absent in this definition of 'technologies of self'. The definition also seems rather naïve, as it rather unreflectively presupposes that individuals can autonomously work on themselves. Lynn Hunt has criticized this as an ahistorical approach to the history of the self, as 'though the forms of self-transformation vary over time in Foucault's analysis, the grounds of its psychic possibility do not.' Foucault's concept is, she argued, 'a distinctly modern or post-eighteenth-century formulation, in which individuals are figured as separate beings with separate selves who are able to act upon themselves and even transform themselves' (Hunt, 1992: 85). We should, therefore, recognize that most of the techniques that people use to transform themselves are recommended or prescribed by a society (Goldstein, 1999: 43–4, 2005: 13). However, I would also allow room for the possibility of resistance against these technologies, for some autonomy. Just as power is present in every society, so is individual autonomy to some extent possible in every society. The 'autonomous individual' need not be present in a society for individuals to have some degree of autonomy. The concept of 'techniques of the self' makes possible the analysis of both disciplining and liberating techniques of forming and transforming the self.[4]

Techniques of the self may be practiced alone, in a private setting or publically. They may produce the desired effect or they may not. Well-studied examples include meditating, confessing, penance, examining your conscience, autobiographical writing, psychoanalysis or taking psychological advice. But there are less obvious examples: drinking alcohol to lose self-control, for instance, or reading philosophical treatises to learn more about how the self works. Techniques of self can be practised voluntarily, though this is not necessary. People may be stimulated or even forced to do something to alter their self. Mandatory psychological therapy, for instance, may be part of a conviction.

[3] This is similar to what Nedim Karakayali (2015) has called, in a recent article surveying the work of social scientists on the activities through which we shape our selves, 'self practices', the term which I will reserve for the larger category.

[4] As philosopher Ian Burkitt (2002) has noted, Foucault's under-theorized concept of 'technologies of the self' greatly benefits from practice theory and the notion of 'habit' or 'habitus' as proposed by John Dewey and Pierre Bourdieu. It is yet another reason why it is useful to consider 'technologies of the self' as a particular form of practices of self.

Jan Goldstein has already very fruitfully employed the concept of 'technologies of the self' to study Cousinian psychology in early nineteenth-century France.[5] Cousin's method of introspection was not only the basis of his philosophical system, she posited, but a technology of the self. It was 'a learned skill that helped to fashion a particular kind of self'. Cousin was rather vague about how this introspection, or 'interior observation' as he called it, should exactly take place and what it should discover. It was, however, the act of interior observation itself that was important, as it was through this act that people became active, responsible subjects. As they examined their inner selves, they established that they had a single, unitary self and that they could know this self. Through Cousinian introspection, people transformed their self to become more whole and more interior (Goldstein, 1999: 44–8, 2005: 165–71).

(2) A second category of practices of self is made up of what Jan Goldstein has called 'self-talk', or what Monique Scheer has termed 'naming practices'. These are the practices by which people explicitly talk or write about their self, their inner or outer orientation, their wholeness or fragmentation, their autonomy or lack thereof. By saying something was 'inner', people formed their sense of interiority, by claiming behaviour as a consequence of their true self or personality, they created this true self and personality. Self-talk has the same self-altering effects that William Reddy claimed for his 'emotives'. The availability of a language to talk about the self therefore has a distinct influence on the way people do their self.

Again, the example of Cousinian psychology could serve here: by creating a new language to talk about the self, Cousin and his followers changed it, they 'shaped the self in part through the deceptively simple gesture of naming it, of affixing the label *moi* to a certain kind of mental content' (Goldstein, 2005: 165). Perhaps even more telling is the impact of Freudian language on twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptions of self. It is today hard to write about people's motivations without referring to their 'unconscious' desires and goals. The omnipresence of the language of the unconscious has changed the way we think of ourselves and of others: it has given us an even greater sense of depth, a sense of dispossession, of not being fully in control of ourselves, and of fragmentation.

(3) Interpretations are a third category of practices to consider. People may be seen as intentionally and unintentionally conveying aspects of their self in all sorts of practices.

[5] Although Goldstein uses the concept in a slightly different way than I do: her definition of 'technologies of the self' does not require that people perform these techniques on themselves; she also allows less space for resistance and individual autonomy. This does not, however, affect the example of Cousinian psychology as I give it here.

These practices can be interpreted, by themselves and by others, in varying ways and these interpretations in turn influence the self. When people explain behaviour, they often link this to the self: they can refer to internal or external circumstances, to true selves or to temporary displacements. In doing so, they again form and transform the self.

Dror Wahrman (2004: 294–99) has referred to many of these interpreting practices in his study of the making of the modern self. A great example is the use of physiognomy in late eighteenth-century Britain. The late eighteenth century witnessed the reinvention of physiognomy, the art of interpreting people's physical appearance as a sign of their character, by the Swiss philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater in his *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-78). In Lavater's new approach, physiognomy's goal was still to discover 'the correspondence between the external and internal man', but now the individual was, unlike in earlier versions of physiognomy, considered as a whole. Not just aspects (type of eyebrows, weight,…) were studied, but the whole face or even the whole body became 'the index of the mind'. The popularity of Lavater and his followers was enormous. Their work not only points to changing conceptions of self, but also enacted these conceptions: people started to consider themselves and others as more stable, more unique and more whole. Although Wahrman does not recognize this, it also points to an outer orientation: people did not have to search their interior to find their true self, but could just read their bodies and faces.

(4) Regulating practices are Scheer's final category and I use it here as well. This term refers to social norms concerning the self, as conveyed in self-help manuals, philosophical and moralising literature, by preachers and psychologists and in education, all written to change and regulate other people's selves. People are sometimes explicitly instructed to live authentically, to explore their self, or to renounce their self-interest; at other times, they are implicitly told that they will be held accountable for their behaviour, that their self is whole, or that they cannot change. They may also be taught that the unified self is a fiction, a bundle of perceptions, or, on the contrary, that it founds all human knowledge.

The most obvious example here is perhaps the cult of authenticity in the second half of the eighteenth century, as most famously personified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau advocated living in a state of nature, free from social influences. Especially in his *Emile* (1762). his book on the education of children, he argued that people – at least, men – should learn to discover their inner natures and to rely on this nature when making decisions. He had experienced this in his own life, for, as he concluded in his autobiographical *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776-8) when he acted not on his own urges, but according to what people expected from him, deeds that could have been useful only brought harm and misery.

Rousseau clearly argued against a social orientation of the male self. With this argumentation, Rousseau tried to regulate other people's selves (Seigel, 2005: 210–47).

Looking for these four categories of practices of self in the available historical sources makes it possible to go beyond debates about experience versus expression, beyond debates about self-conscious expressions versus 'unstructured intuitions'. It is vital to recognize whether people themselves considered these as differences, but equally vital to recognize that expressions of self are never just expressions, but make up the self itself.

In conclusion

In this article, I have made two methodological suggestions for doing the history of the self. First, I have proposed destabilizing the modern self by writing the histories of its different and paradoxical aspects, such as (1) interiority and outer orientation, (2) stability and flexibility, (3) holism and fragmentation, and (4) self-control and dispossession. Second, to bridge the perceived gap between ideas and experiences, I proposed studying four 'practices of self' through which the self is created, namely (1) techniques of self, (2) self-talk, (3) interpreting the self, and (4) regulating practices.

Using this double approach may help to overcome some of the problems that currently occupy scholars in the history of the self. By way of conclusion, I will try to illustrate the advantages of this methodology with an application from my own research concerning stigma and the self in the late eighteenth century. My aim is to find out whether and how the self changed between 1750 and 1830 among common people and especially people on the margins. To do so, I study trial records, particularly suspect interrogations, of various sorts of criminals. It is often very difficult to approach these sources with traditional methods used to study the self: only very rarely is the self explicitly referred to. The four axes and the four practices I discern can help to approach less obvious sources that are not generally used to study the self.

Take, for instance, the case of Jacob Mol, accused of attempting to murder his wife in Antwerp in 1750 (Felix Archives Antwerp *V* 103 Jacob Mol 1750). When he was asked 'how he had lived with his wife', he told judges their whole history together, up to the moment that he had stabbed her. Nine years earlier, he had married Françoise Ketelaar, only to leave her eight weeks later after a heavy row. A few weeks on, he started to live with her again for a while. Then they separated again, and so their marriage continued with ups and downs. Mol described some of the fights they had, and, eventually, how his wife angered him by

continually insulting him the evening he stabbed her. ‘Mort Dieu,’ he said, ‘I won’t bear this any longer’. His wife then blew out the lights, he grabbed a knife and stabbed her. When the judges asked him why, he said he did it ‘because he was in fury and huge anger’.

While this case does, in the first instance, not seem to provide much information on the self, closer inspection using the methods described above allows us to learn a great deal. Most obvious are the regulating practices initiated by the judges: by asking Mol ‘how he had lived with his wife’, they tried to tie his past history with Ketelaar to his more recent actions, thus suggesting a stable self. By asking him *why* he had stabbed his wife, they moreover tried to cast his actions as autonomous, wilful decisions. Mol, however, resisted these attempts to regulate his self, interpreting his actions and history in a different way. While he went along with his judges when describing his long-standing history of quarrels with his wife, he did suggest a break. The ill-fated evening, he was ‘half-drunk’ and he stabbed her while ‘in fury’, therefore, as his solicitor would later argue, he was at that time ‘non compos sui’, not in control of himself. So, while Mol indicated that he was generally in control of his actions, at that specific moment his autonomous self was apparently ‘displaced’, it was not stable enough to withstand the combination of drunkenness and anger.

Mol’s confession was, of course, in the first place something demanded by his judges. But in this particular case, it was not only a regulating practice. Mol himself actively sought to confess his crime. After he had stabbed his wife and he thought that she was dead, he put on his best clothes, went to a friendly officer and asked him to take him to prison. The officer, however, first took Mol home again, to check whether his wife was really dead. This happened not to be the case; in fact she had only suffered minor injuries. Mol was surprised, but still insisted that he be taken to prison for interrogation. While his motivations are not made clear, this could be interpreted as a technology of self, actively seeking to come clean and practicing honesty and authenticity.

The case of Jacob Mol also illustrates how the self is socially shaped. Practices of the self are often given form in groups and in institutions. While a detailed analysis of the role of institutions of punishment in the shaping of the self would take us too far (but see Butler, 2005: 7–22; Foucault, 1973, 1975), it is clear that criminal courts are highly invested in a reflexive, stable and autonomous self. The regulating practices legal and political structures imposed on Mol and his contemporaries show that the self did not develop on its own, but was at least in part socially determined.

This single case is of course just that – a single case. What I wish to show is that the methods I propose allow us to look at sources in a different way, analysing the different

practices of the self from different positions and identifying conflicting discourses. It shows us how the self was practiced in different situations and what the effect of these practices was. Sources are approached not just as ‘signs’ of self, but as having an active part in the constitution of the selves, as their creation went along with several practices of self. The discourses and practices of self that I discern are not exhaustive: other scholars will doubtlessly consider other aspects of the self that have changed through time, other sorts of practices by which the self was enacted. The theoretical and methodological reflections in this paper may help, however, to better articulate the different positions in the field and advance discussion and reflection. That is how we should do the history of the self.

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